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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether gifted and nongifted middle school students differ in TV viewing habits, family rules, TV heroes/heroines, programming preferences, violence, grades in reading, bedtime hours, out-of-school lessons and hobbies, and ownership and use of TV sets and computers. Subjects were matched pairs of 130 middle school students in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 who ranged in age from 9 to 13 years. The 65 gifted students had been enrolled in a university-based gifted program offering classes in eight academic disciplines for four consecutive Saturday sessions. Responses to a 43-item questionnaire suggest that significant differences exist between gifted and nongifted students with respect to TV habits, family rules, grades in reading, as well as participation in out-of-school activities, including lessons of various kinds. It was found that nongifted students spent more time watching TV after school and in evenings, stay up later on school nights, and received lower grades in reading, perhaps because the nongifted had their own personal TV sets. It was further found that gifted students, in contrast to nongifted students, apparently did not engage in wishful thinking or in fantasizing about fictional or popular TV characters. It is concluded that family rules about television habits do influence school achievement and seem to affect children in their social development. (Author/RH)

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TV VIEWING HABITS, FAMILY RULES, AND READING GRADES OF GIFTED AND NONGIFTED MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS

The influence of television on pupil achievement continues to be de-
bated through conflicting research studies, conducted by educators as well
as researchers outside of professional education. And, although academically
gifted children very likely were represented in the populations studied,
apparently no research has been done on this specific sub-population with
respect to TV viewing habits, family or household rules, grades, program
preferences and other related variables.

An earlier study by Long and Henderson (1970) revealed that fifth grade
students, who read at grade level or above, spent the largest amount of time
watching TV and seldom engaged in leisure reading. Besides sleep, they
indicated that the most popular activity was watching TV for roughly 15 hours
per week. One-third of this group indicated that they did not engage in
reading during the two-week period of the study.

Morgan (1980) found that heavy viewers of TV read fewer types of
materials, however, among low I.Q. students, the more TV they watched, the
more types of materials they like to read. Included among the findings is

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that heavy viewers are significantly more likely than light viewers to prefer stories about love and families, teenage stories, and true stories about stars. Light viewers, on the other hand, choose science fiction, mysteries, and general non-fiction. There is a qualitative difference then in the kinds of material read by heavy and light viewers.

Another study of reading preferences between heavy and light viewers (Neuman 1982) indicated that students who preferred to read, rather than to watch TV, read the highest quality books when reading for leisure; conversely, students who were heavy TV viewers, selected books of lower quality.

TV habits change over time, according to Neuman and Prowda (1982), due perhaps to age-related changes in interests and other activities that influence use of leisure time. Furthermore, low test scores were associated with more than four hours of viewing each day, and less able students were found to be heavy viewers, compared to their peers who were involved in social and school activities.

In another earlier study, Childers and Ross (1973) concluded that the quantity and quality of televiewing had not changed in 20 years and TV habits or time spent in watching TV were not predictors of pupil achievement. Furthermore, there was no significant relationship between the amount of time a child spends watching TV and grades in school.

A more recent research synthesis of television and learning, by Williams, E.H. Haertel, G.D. Haertel, and Walberg (1982) indicates that overall, the correlation of hours spent in viewing TV and achievement is negative but small ($-.05$), however the overall effect is not constant across the range of viewing times. For example, watching TV up to ten hours per week had a

negative impact. Thus, the effect of televiewing on achievement is small and therefore accounts for little variance in achievement. Television, then, is neither the "villain" nor the "redeemer" as claimed by some.

To indicate further the conflicting reports about the influence of TV on grades, Ridley-Johnson, Cooper and Chance (1982) found that in families where parents established and enforced rules about TV watching, children attained high I.Q.s and had better grades in school.

In a study of over 10,000 sixth-graders, Fetler (1984) analyzed the effects of televiewing as related to social class, study habits, and home environment. Students who watched a moderate amount of TV have higher achievement scores compared to students who watch less TV. Considering social class, Fetler also found that viewing of more than four hours of television per day was associated with lower achievement for ALL students in the study, regardless of social class. He also reported a difference between programs most watched by light and heavy viewers. In homes where parents actively controlled the amount and type of programming viewed, students spent less time watching TV. He concluded that there appears to be a "threshold" amount of viewing beyond which TV has a negative association with achievement.

Several family variables and different aspects of television were investigated by Zuckerman, D.G. Singer and J.L. Singer (1980). These researchers found that the educational level and employment status of the mother, the child's birth order, the number of siblings, parents' TV habits, number of TV sets in the home and parental limits on children's TV viewing time were not significantly related to I.Q., reading ability, and reading and school behaviors. In addition, children's total viewing time and the kinds of programs viewed were unrelated to I.Q. and reading ability.

An extensive review of studies on televiewing and student achievement indicates that gifted students as a sub-population have not been studied with respect to TV habits, grades, and family rules. Abelman (1984), however, reported that a significant body of research indicates that parents can and do influence their children's viewing "patterns," yet claims that few parents are actively involved in their children's TV viewing. He claimed, further, that parents of gifted children in particular, have few household rules regarding TV and also are less likely than parents of nongifted children to engage in discussion of TV programs with their children.

Another reference to gifted children was made by Page (1983) who reported that there is no difference in the number of household rules about TV among parents of gifted and nongifted children.

The reports about gifted children by both Abelman and Page are refuted by this study of gifted middle school students. This study also revealed a number of additional significant differences between gifted and nongifted students in not only their TV habits and program preferences, but their heroes/heroines, grades in reading, student access to and competence in the use of computers. The number of kinds of out-of-school activities and lessons, as well as opinions about violence on TV also were analyzed. One-third of the findings in this 43-item study of gifted and nongifted middle school students were statistically significant.

METHODS

Subjects

The subjects in this study were matched pairs of 130 middle school students in grades 5, 6, 7, and 8 ranging in age from 9 to 13 years. The 65

gifted students, referred to in the graphics as "program" students, had been enrolled in a university, campus-based gifted program where classes in eight academic disciplines were taught for four consecutive Saturday sessions by full-service professors. These gifted students were identified by their faculty in their respective schools. Enrollment was on a first-come, first-served basis. The names of students used in the study were taken from enrollment rosters covering the past four years. The 65 nongifted students, referred to in the graphics as "nonprogram," or nongifted students, were randomly selected from the same schools represented by the gifted students.

Procedure

A four-page, 43-item questionnaire was mailed to 90 gifted middle school students who had participated in "Saturday Treasures on Campus." The students were of similar socio-economic backgrounds and represented seven school districts.

To obtain matched pairs of nongifted students, sets of the questionnaire were taken to the same school districts, with instructions that the questionnaires were to be given to heterogenously mixed classes, in grades 5, 6, 7, 8. Sixty-five questionnaires were then randomly selected for all four grade levels and matched with the first sixty-five questionnaires received in the mail from the gifted population.

Of the total 130 questionnaires analyzed in this study, 68 girls and 62 boys were represented. An analysis revealed that the data were unbiased, (responses were not influenced by age, grade, or sex).

Levels of significance, chi-squares, degrees of freedom, number and percentage distributions are included in the descriptive statistics. Fifteen

items, roughly one-third, were statistically significant at the less than .001 level of significance.

FINDINGS

While the primary focus of this study was on television habits, family rules about televiewing, perceptions of violence and other TV related questions, additional information was obtained to compare gifted and nongifted students with respect to grades in reading, out-of-school activities, music or other kinds of lessons, as well as use of computers.

In this study, there were many significant differences between gifted and nongifted students. A greater proportion of gifted students do most of their televiewing on weekends rather than after school and in evenings, and family rules influence time spent on TV watching and program choices. Both groups believe there is too much violence on TV, however the students' perceptions of whether or not their parents think there is too much violence differed. A greater proportion of nongifted students felt their parents did not believe that there was too much violence on TV. When asked about whether they had a TV set for their own personal use, a significant number of NON-GIFTED students responded that they have their own set, which may be a reason for the difference in perceptions about their parents' opinions: the nongifted probably do most of their viewing in their own rooms, therefore, their parents may be less likely to observe the kinds of programs their children watch. Furthermore, gifted students go to bed between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. on school nights compared to the nongifted, most of whom appear not to have a regular bedtime, with many of them going to bed later than 10:00 p.m. Again, the nongifted watch more TV in the evenings compared to the gifted.

The few studies available on students' TV habits, reading achievement do not focus on gifted students as a distinct population. A significant finding in this study, therefore, is that 78.5% of the nongifted students compared to 30.8% of the gifted indicated that they would rather watch TV than read [$\chi^2 = 29.82$; $df = 1$; $P.L.001$]. In addition, 67.8% of the gifted compared to 20.6% of the nongifted students received an "A" as their last or most recent grade in reading [$\chi^2 = 33.36$; $df = 2$; $P.L.001$].

An attempt also was made to determine whether or not the students viewed TV characters as heroes or heroines, and again, nongifted students prefer to be like TV characters. They gave examples of soap opera "stars," a fictional mystery writer, etc. This finding also was significant.

Consistent with the widely accepted personal characteristics of gifted children, this study verified that gifted children have various interests and hobbies, and participate in a number of out-of-school activities, such as youth organizations, church groups, etc. And, since all the students in the study come from moderately affluent families, the finding that they all took lessons of one kind or another was not surprising. Gifted students, however, were significantly involved in more than one kind of lesson: piano and violin, gymnastics and drama, etc.

Many current programs for gifted students include student use of computers, and in this study, there was a significant difference between gifted and nongifted students in their access to and proficiency in the use of computers, even though both groups reported that machines were in their classrooms. An interesting, but nonsignificant finding was that computers in the home of gifted children were more sophisticated or complex compared to the machines or "makes" that are frequently purchased for video games.

A significant proportion of nongifted students reported that they had their own TV sets, for their own use, which may partially account for their heavy TV viewing habits compared to the habits of the gifted. On the other hand, a significant proportion of gifted students have VCRs in their homes.

The final question in the survey elicited responses about possible TV program changes for young people their age. Again, responses between the gifted and nongifted students differed, with gifted students indicating that they would like to see "more intelligent" game shows, more educational and instructional programs that would "teach" them how to make something or how to play a sport. They also wished for biographies and documentaries and more programs overall for young people. The nongifted students, however, requested more of the same: more cartoons, "sitcoms," "soaps," game shows, etc. and they did not qualify their responses to this question as did the gifted students. Throughout the study the gifted students wrote notes, comments, posed additional questions and seemed to want to help the researchers!

SUMMARY

Significant differences exist between gifted and nongifted students with respect to TV habits, family rules, grades in reading, as well as participation in out-of-school activities, including lessons of various kinds. The finding that parents influence their children's viewing times and selection of programs in this study is in agreement with the finding by Bower (1973) who also found that parents who influenced their children had a college education. Children who watch a great deal of television each week had parents who also were heavy viewers and had fewer family rules about appropriate programs; these parents were less educated.

Leifer, Gordon and Graves (1974) found that mothers who watch TV at least three and one-half hours a day are likely to have children who are heavy viewers; they recommend that parents should provide guidance for their children in their TV habits.

In a day when heroes or heroines are mechanical (E.T.), or fictional, such as those in Star Wars, we were interested in finding out whether or not students in this study had any heroes as seen on television. In this study a greater number of nongifted girls, compared to nongifted boys and gifted boys and girls, wished to be "like" certain TV characters, such as a fictional mystery writer in "Murder She Wrote," or a soap star, Joan Collins, and others. Our conclusion is that perhaps gifted students have a more positive self-concept, are mature and busily engaged in numerous activities and, therefore, do not feel a need to identify with TV characters. While no one appears to have studied TV heroes/heroines and children's perceptions, Reeves and Miller (1978) found that a greater number of boys compared to girls identified with TV actors who played "tough cops," "macho men," etc. Another related study about children's perceptions and TV characters was conducted by Reeves and Garramone (1982) who found that children do indeed form perceptions about real-life people and roles based on the people seen on TV. Similarly Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, and Neuendorf (1982) analyzed children's perceptions about families seen on television and concluded that the children believe that families in real life are supportive and concerned for each other as seen on television episodes.

IMPLICATIONS

Based on this study, family rules about television habits do influence school achievement and seem to affect children in their social development

because less time spent in watching television increases the opportunity for children to engage in out-of-school activities and in the development of cultural aspects of their lives.

Considering the unusual number of significant differences between gifted and nongifted students in this study, and the fact that in this study gifted students completed the questionnaire in their homes whereas the nongifted responded in their classrooms, we suggest that a similar study be conducted where the setting or situation between the two groups would be the same. At the same time, however, given the fact that gifted children are known to be self-reliant and independent, we feel that the responses of the gifted children were indeed their own opinions and valid, and uninfluenced significantly by their parents.

The descriptive statistics include number and percentage distributions, levels of significance, chi-squares, and degrees of freedom.

While the primary focus was on TV, data also were obtained about student interests, hobbies, out-of-school lessons or activities, as well as information about TV sets and manufacturers, of computers in and out-of-school, VCRs and cable television.

TV Habits and Family Rules

The students were NOT asked how many hours a day do you watch TV because the researchers felt that given their ages, these students would not be completely candid. Instead, they were asked, "Do you regularly watch TV after school? in the evening? or mostly on weekends?"

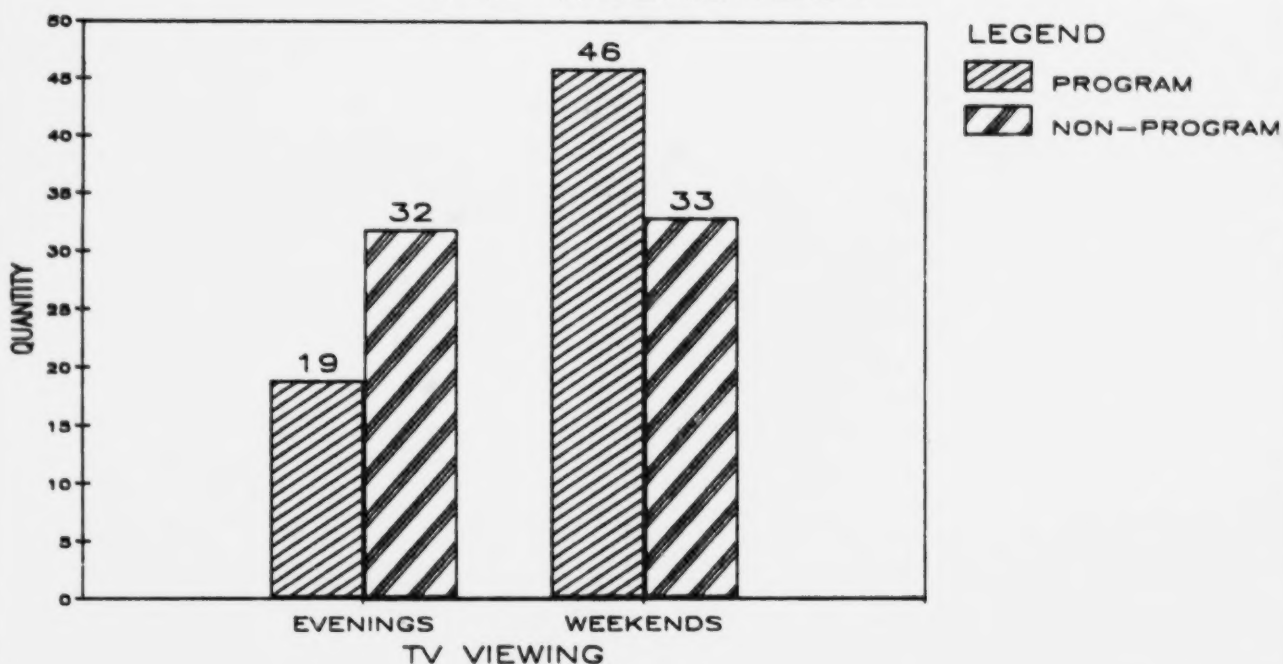
- A greater proportion of gifted students watch TV on weekends compared to the proportion of students not in the gifted program, or the non-gifted students.*
- A greater proportion of gifted students had family rules about the amount of time and kinds of programs they were permitted to watch.
- Results of gifted students having higher grades in reading were calculated at the less than .001 level of significance.
- A greater proportion of the gifted students go to bed between 9:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m. compared to the non-gifted students, most of whom do not have a fixed bedtime on school nights and who tend to go to bed by 10:00 p.m. or later.
- A greater proportion of gifted students prefer to read than watch TV.

In response to an open-ended question asking which TV character they wish to be like, gifted students do not wish to be like any TV character whereas many non-gifted students indicated that they wish they could be like Angela Lansbury, in "Murder, She Write," or like Joan Collins in "Dynasty." Students supplied their own preferences; the item did not contain multiple choices.

**"Program" - Gifted Students
"Non-program" - Non-gifted Students

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QUESTION: DO YOU SPEND MORE TIME
WATCHING TV AFTER SCHOOL OR ON
THE WEEKENDS?



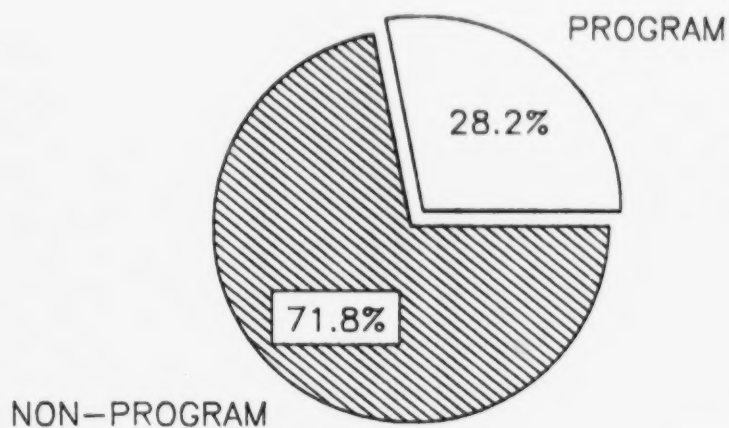
SAMPLE - 65

QUESTION: WHAT WAS YOUR LAST LETTER
GRADE IN READING?



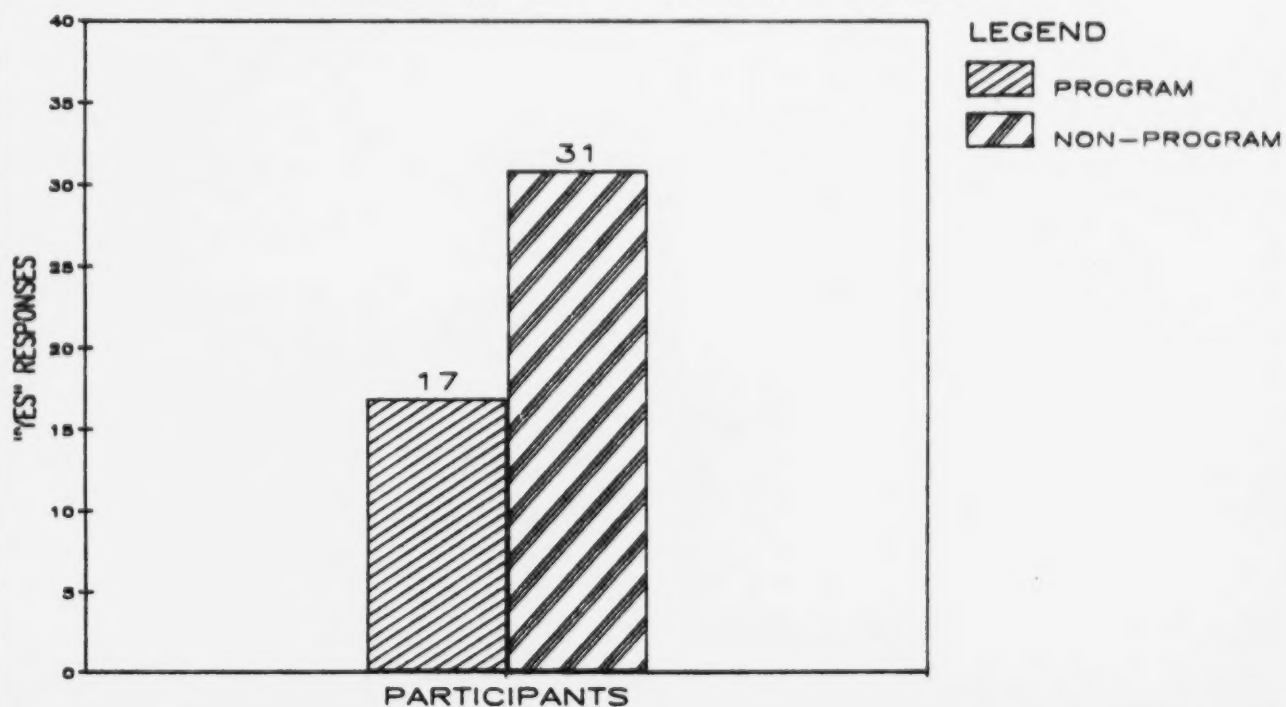
SAMPLE - 65

QUESTION: WOULD YOU RATHER WATCH
TV THAN READ?



SAMPLE = 65

QUESTION: IS THERE A TV CHARACTER
YOU WISH TO BE LIKE?



SAMPLE = 65

Interests, Lessons and Hobbies

A greater proportion of gifted students belong to outside organizations such as youth groups, scouting groups, etc. There was a close but not significant difference between the two groups in the number of lessons they take after school or on Saturday. A significant difference exists, however, between the groups with respect to the NUMBER of lessons taken, with the gifted group taking more than one kind of lesson: ex. music, dance, drama, gymnastics, etc.

A greater proportion of gifted students have hobbies compared to the non-gifted students.

TV Sets, Cable TV, Computers, VCRs

Both groups indicated that there were computers in their classrooms. There was a significant difference in the fact that gifted children were given frequent opportunities to use the computers and were most proficient or skillful in using computers.

A greater proportion of gifted children had computers in their homes. When asked the name of the manufacturer, computers in the homes of the gifted were more sophisticated and not the brand or make used primarily for games. This finding, however, was not significant.

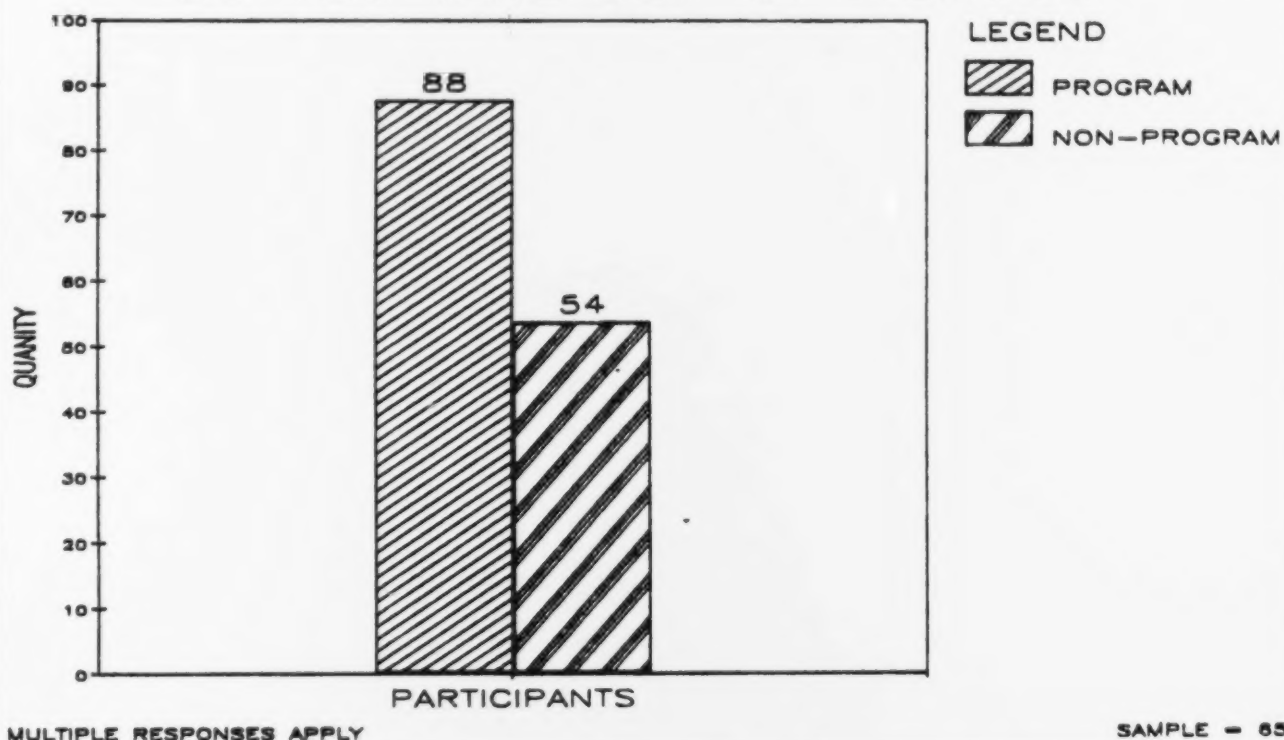
A greater proportion of gifted students indicated that they did NOT have their own set whereas a greater proportion of non-gifted students had their own set, "just for yourself."

A greater proportion of gifted students indicated that they have VCRs in their homes.

TV Programming

In response to the question, "What changes would you like to see in TV programming for young people your age?" there appeared to be QUALITATIVE

QUESTION: HOW MANY DIFFERENT LESSONS
DO YOU TAKE OUT-OF-SCHOOL?



differences in the preferences between the gifted and non-gifted. The gifted students described the kinds of educational programs they would like to see, for example, "ones that teach you a skill" such as music and sports instruction. The non-gifted more frequently requested sitcoms, cartoons, and even "soaps".

Discussion

The students in this study attend schools in somewhat affluent suburbs, approximately 7 to 10 miles from the urban state university. Consequently, the advantages of lessons and other out-of-school activities were afforded to both groups.

The findings that students not in the gifted program spend more time watching TV after school and in evenings, stay up later on school nights, and get lower grades in reading may be attributed to the fact that they have their own personal TV sets.

The diversity or variety of lessons taken by gifted students is not surprising and is consistent with the widely publicized characteristics of gifted children, i.e., they have diverse interests and often are multi-talented.

A most interesting finding in this study is that gifted students apparently do not engage in wishful thinking or in fantasizing about fictional or popular TV characters. One can speculate that the reason is due to the enhanced self-concept of the high academic achiever, or because gifted students are continuously BUSY, or engaged in a variety of activities, which also lead to self-confidence.

Recommendation

Although both gifted and non-gifted students in this study believe that there is too much violence in television programs, they tend to watch the

same kinds of programs perhaps because of the limited number of choices in commercial broadcasting.

Throughout the questionnaires received from gifted children, numerous notations, short notes offering explanations, and even alternative questions were expressed! This interesting and often amusing finding again is in keeping with the fact that gifted children are not satisfied with cut-and-dried answers. Furthermore, they seemed to want to "help" the researchers by giving them additional information.

We recommend that a study be made of HOW gifted and non-gifted children view TV. For example, a 7 year old gifted student told his mother that he wondered how special effects were achieved on a particular program. Do gifted children look differently at and receive different perceptions as they watch television compared to non-gifted students? Since not a single gifted student in this study indicated that he or she wished to be like a TV character, who then are their heroes or heroines? Following the study, a parent of one of the students stated that her son, now 14 years old, wants to be a famous heart surgeon like Dr. DeBakey and has held to that dream since he was in kindergarten.

*Appreciation is given to Dr. Pietro Pascale, Youngstown State University, for his statistical analysis of the data.

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ABSTRACT

This multi-purpose study was to determine whether differences exist between gifted and nongifted middle school students with respect to TV viewing habits, family rules, TV heroes/heroines, programming preferences, violence, grades in reading, bedtime hours, out-of-school lessons and hobbies, and ownership and use of TV sets and computers.

One-third of the responses to the 43 item questionnaire were statistically different between gifted and nongifted middle school students.